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ABSTRACT

This study sought to determine whether the self-concepts of African American at-risk and not-at-risk elementary school students differed significantly. The research was based on the self-concept theories of Mead, Lehy and Shirk, and Purkey. Ninety-four fifth and sixth grade students from a South Mississippi school district, half of them at risk, half not, responded to the "About Me Self-Concept Report," a 30-item Likert-type scale. Significant differences were found between the two groups on the "general self," the "self in relation to others," and the "physical self." No difference between the groups was found on the "achieving self" and the "self-in-school" items. Since there is evidence that early intervention can improve the self-concepts of at-risk students, guidance services should be extended so more children can be counselled, and counselors should help elementary school teachers plan and implement effective activities to foster positive self-concepts among at-risk students. A list of 25 references is included, and a table presents the findings statistically. (WS)

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**SELF-CONCEPT REPORT DIFFERENCES
BETWEEN AT-RISK AND NOT AT-RISK AFRICAN-AMERICAN
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS:
IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER, COUNSELORS, AND PRINCIPALS**

by

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**Presented at the Annual Meeting of the
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to ascertain if African-American at-risk and not-at-risk elementary school pupils differed significantly in their self-concepts. The research was based on the self-concept theories of Mead, Leahy and Shirk, and Purkey. From their conceptualizations of the self as it is structured, as it is situationally dependent, and as it is values related, it seemed plausible to conjecture that at-risk and not-at-risk elementary school students might manifest significantly different levels of self-concepts. Ninety-four students (47 at-risk and 47 not-at-risk) were given the About Me Self-Concept Report, a thirty-item, Likert-type scale. Significant differences were found between the two groups on the "general self," the "self in relation to others," and the "physical self." The findings of no difference between the two groups on the "achieving self" and the "self in school" were perplexing and were discussed at some length further on in the paper.

The latter part of the 1980s has witnessed an increased interest in the relationship of cognitive skills achievement to affective development among elementary school students (Henry, 1986; Walker & Madhere, 1987; Tutiuli & Gama, 1986). Among the affective variables of interest, investigations into the self concept and its relationship to the quality of elementary school students, socially and academically, is being given renewed attention. While the findings are promising, they do not establish clear linkages between students' success in school environments and the levels of their self-concept development. Purkey (1970) stated that:

Although data do not provide clear-cut evidence about which comes first, . . . it does stress a strong reciprocal relationship and gives us reason to assume that enhancing the self concept is vital . . . (p. 27)

In their efforts to study hypothesized relations between the self concept and success within a school environment, researchers have recently begun to investigate the self concept among, so called, at-risk elementary school children (Henry, 1986; Youth Development and Research Center, 1986). While most of these reports described their self-concept intervention programs, very few of the research

designs compared the self concept of the at-risk population with a control population of students who did not possess stated characteristics of at-risk students. Also, there are no studies that, specifically, investigated differences in concepts of self held by African-American elementary school students. It seems logical that, if the concepts of selves held by those elementary students who are identified as at-risk differed significantly from those concepts of selves held by the students who do not belong in the at-risk category, this could lead teachers, school administrators, guidance counselors, and parents of African-American students to consider these self-concept differences as they begin to plan developmental cognitive and affective activities for their children.

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to ascertain if, in fact, the concepts of self held by at-risk and not at-risk, African-American, elementary school students differed significantly. The following problem statement guided the research efforts:

Are there significant differences between the self-concepts held by African-American at-risk and not-at-risk elementary school students?
school?

For the purpose of the present research, the following definitions were utilized:

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1. At-risk students are defined as "those who underachieve in school despite adequate intellectual endowments," and who exhibit severe attendance and behavior problems (Comer, 1987, p. 13). This variable was operationalized through the use of a teacher-completed survey instrument that asked them to indicate, for each of their students, the number of at-risk characteristics that matched with each student. Teachers, guidance counselors, and building principals met and made final placement decisions based on the gathered data.
2. Self-concept is defined as "a complex and dynamic system of beliefs which an individual holds true about himself, each belief with a corresponding value" (Purkey, 1970, p. 7). The self concept was viewed as a multi-dimensional concept. Burns (1979) stated that, "it would seem more appropriate and in line with common sense to view the self concept as a constellation of attitudes toward self" (p. 67). This variable was operationalized through the use of The About Me Self-Concept Report (Phifer, 1971).
3. The not at-risk students were defined as those students who were not involved in any Chapter I programs, who were reported by their teachers to be

experiencing success within the school environment, who had good attendance records, and exhibited satisfactory social behavior.

CONCEPTUAL DISCUSSION

Self theories have had a long and, somewhat, disparate history. Leahy and Shirk (1985) discussed the evolution of self theories from the prepsychological period through the 18th century thinking and into the 20th century, where they indicated that the self as a construct was finally recognized as a valid object of inquiry. Up until the last decade of the 19th century, theories of self were based on philosophical analyses. According to Purkey (1970), "terms such as mind, soul, psyche, and self were often used interchangeably, with scant regard for an invariant vocabulary or scientific experimentation. For the most part, a general state of confusion in regard to the concept of self existed into this present century" (p. 25).

According to Leahy and Shirk (1985), William James took the lead in viewing the concept of self more objectively. James, according to Leahy and Shirk, claimed "that this empirical self comprises four components which are classed in descending order": (a) the spiritual self, (b) the material self, (c) the social self, and (d) the bodily self "These four selves combine in unique ways to constitute each

person's view of himself and in many respects cannot be neatly split up" (pp. 7-8).

Hansen and Maynard (1973) stated that, "throughout the twenties and thirties and into the forties, Watson and other behaviorists ... gave scant attention to the self With their strong emphasis on observable stimuli and response, managed to down-play such internal constructs as self, mind, and consciousness" (pp. 4-5). On the other hand, as reported by Labenne and Greene (1964), Mead, a prominent psychologist, indicated that various selves can be differentiated by the specific set of responses in different social settings. Home attitudes expressed toward a person create a home self, school attitudes expressed by teachers and classroom experiences create a school self; and social attitudes expressed by peers and others in a social setting create a social self (p. 4).

The present study is based partly on the theory of Mead (1934) and the theory discussed by Leahy and Shirk (1985). Mead theorized that the existence of self was largely determined by the setting in which the individual found him/herself. Leahy and Shirk posited that the self develops from a level that they refer to as the "objective self" level to the "subjective-process self" level. These levels or stages of self development are differentiated as the child's internal or psychological attributes become objects of interest (e.g., traits, feelings, attitudes, and

motivation). Leahy and Shirk stated that, "the individual at the 'subjective' second level may judge his or her behavior in terms of the expectations of others, attempting to conform to these expectations" (p. 145).

The third level of self development is referred to as the "subjective-process" level in which the "self is seen as varying across situations and time and the self's values may become more role independent. "A distinctive quality of self at this level is the tendency to reflect on the process of self's construction or change (i.e., 'Who am I?' 'What do I want to be?')" (Leahy & Shirk, 1985, p. 146).

Leahy and Shirk (1985) did not elaborate on their discussion of the self's values but the notion of values being attached to the self is closely related to Purkey's (1970) discussion. Purkey stated that the organized self is a belief system in which there are beliefs that are closely associated with the "essence" of the self and others that are "less central and important" to the individual's concept of self (p. 9).

The pupils who are the focus of this study seem to be presently operating somewhere between the levels that Leahy and Shirk (1985) referred to as the "subjective" and the "subjective-process" levels. These students are at the age when they judge their "behavior in terms of the expectations of others, attempting to conform to these expectations" (p. 145). The "others" that Leahy and Shirk referred to may be

parents, peers, and not least of all, the teachers and school administrators. Labenne and Greene (1969) stated that, "self-concept is influenced by the relationship a person has with her/her family and peers in unstructured situations and, later on, in more structured situations with teachers and peers" (p. 17). Additionally, these students have already formed their self-concepts that encompasses those things that are valued by their selves. As Purkey (1970) asserted:

Things are significant or insignificant,
important or unimportant, attractive or
have unattractive value or are worthless,
in terms of their relations to oneself.
We value the world and its meaning in
terms of how we see ourselves. Many
students do poorly in school simply
because what that school is doing seems
irrelevant to themselves and to
their world. (p. 10)

From the conceptualization of the self as it might vary across situations, it seems plausible to conjecture that students who find themselves in different classroom situations may be there because they have manifested behaviors that have been identified as at-risk or not at-risk. If this is the case, it is reasonable to question whether these two groups of elementary school students have

similar or different self-concepts. Based on this conceptual discussion, the following hypothesis was stated:

H1: At risk students will have significantly different concepts of selves from the not at-risk students on each of the five dimensions of the self-concept report (i.e., general self, self to others, achieving self, self to school, and physical self).

To determine if the hypothesis was tenable, the .05 level of significance was established.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The subjects of this study consisted of 94 fifth- and sixth-grade, African-American students in a school district in South Mississippi. Forty-seven were students who had been assigned by their teachers and principals to a program titled "The Learning Lab." This was a newly implemented program and the students who were chosen to be placed in this situation had met the criteria of at-risk as defined by the school district officials. Those criteria were closely related to the definition stated by Comer (1987).

The remaining 47 students were in regular classes, but were not involved in any of the Chapter I programs. Nor did they have histories of absenteeism, truancy, or social behavior problems.

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Procedure

Subsequent to a news release in the local paper, this researcher sent a letter to the District Superintendent that requested his permission to conduct a research project which, it was hoped, would demonstrate a need to include a structured affective development program in what was to be a strong cognitive skills development program for those at-risk elementary school students.

After permission from the Superintendent was received, meetings were held jointly with each of the two schools' principals and guidance counselors to enlist their assistance in implementing the research design. With the cooperation of these professionals, meetings were held with the teachers of the at-risk students. The purpose of the investigation was explained and the teachers were assured that there would be no paperwork responsibilities assigned to them. Finally, with the cooperation of the classroom teachers, classroom visitations were made so that the students would feel less threatened when it came time to respond to the self-concept report. All directions and items were read by the researcher in order to explain possible confusing items or words and to control for reading differences that might have existed among the classes.

Instrumentation

Burns (1979) noted that the self-concept is what the subject has to say about him or herself and is based on

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was reduced from a five-point to a three-point, Likert-type scale, (b) the items were used as found in the original instrument but they were not used in reversed form, and (c) the possible response choices were changed from numbers to faces. A panel of judges consisting of professors of educational administration and research, counselling psychology, and doctoral candidates from both disciplines agreed that the new structure was better for the fifth- and sixth-graders.

TAMSCR contains 30 items (six for each of five subscales). For each subscale, mean scores can range from a low of 6 to a high of 18. The lower the score, the less positive the respondent's self-concept.

Phifer (1971) reported a total scale test-retest reliability of .80, with subscale reliabilities ranging from a high of .80 to a low of .65. Myles (1983) reported an overall alpha reliability of .91. The alpha reliabilities for the five subscales ranged from .61 to .81.

Because the adapted instrument's scales was reduced from five points to three points, one would expect that the alpha reliabilities would be somewhat less. For this study sample, the overall scale reliability was .78, with the subscale reliabilities ranging from .50 to .74.

Analysis of Data

T-tests, a special case of analysis of variance, were performed with group (i.e., at-risk or not at-risk)

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classification as the independent variable and the five subscales of TAMSCR as dependent variables. The level of significance was set at $p < .05$.

Results

For the first subscale--The Generalized Self--the results of the analysis indicated that there was a significant difference between the two groups ($t_{[92]} = 2.43$, $p = .017$). As shown in Table 1, the mean scores of the at-risk group was 13.60 and for the not at-risk group was 14.89.

As is shown in Table 1, the two groups differed significantly on the second self-concept subscale--The Self in Relation to Others-- ($t_{[92]} = 3.53$, $p = .001$). The mean score of the at-risk group was 14.13, while that of the not at-risk group was 15.50.

On the third subscale, The Achieving Self, the two groups did not differ significantly ($t_{[92]} = 1.91$, $p > .05$). This finding is somewhat perplexing and will be discussed later in this paper.

The results of the t -test on the data regarding the students' concepts of their selves in school showed that the two groups did not differ significantly ($t_{[92]} = -.45$, $p > .05$). This finding also will be given some added attention in the latter part of the paper.

Finally, with regard to the students' concepts of their physical selves, the analysis of data showed that there was a

significant differences between the two groups. The mean scores for the at-risk and not at-risk groups were 12.87 and 14.08, respectively ($t_{[92]} = 2.81, p = .006$). Figure 1 graphically portrays each of the above findings.

Discussion

According to Kaplan and Luck (1977):

Absenteeism, academic failure, and early school departure are links in a long chain of interconnected problems. Many of these interconnected problems are lack of education tradition, low career expectations, low *self-image*, (*italics added*) . . . and group peer pressure to name a few. (p. 41)

The present study tested the hypothesis that regular class students and students identified as being at-risk would have different concepts about themselves. Some evidence to support this hypothesis was found in the results of the data analyses.

Regular class students in this study seemed to express more favorable and significantly higher satisfaction with themselves than did at-risk students on three of the five dimensions of the self-concept report (i.e., The General Self, The Self With Others, and The Physical Self). The finding of differences in attitudes about the general self is supported by the research of Self (1985) who concluded

from a review of the literature that a poor self-concept is one characteristic of a potential dropout.

The finding of a significant difference between the concept of self to others is consistent with the literature that indicated that at-risk students have social behavior problems and have difficulty relating to authority figures. Wehlage and Rutter (1986) noted that potential dropouts or at-risk students often believe that the school's disciplinary system is neither effective or fair. Ghory and Sinclair (1987) asserted that "to be a marginal student (i.e., at-risk) is to experience a strained, difficult relationship within the school environment. Shinn, Ramsey, Walker, and Stieber (1987) found that at-risk fourth-grade students exhibited more antisocial behavior than did their normal class peers.

The finding of no significant difference between the concept of self as an achiever was surprising and might be explained in several ways:

1. The "Learning Lab" classes in the two schools were served by two regular teachers, one special education teacher, and one remedial reading/math teacher. In addition to the personnel who were assigned to each school, the classes were small. The maximum allowed was 12 students and not all classes reached the maximum enrollment. During the days of observations in each class, the amount of personal attention given to each student became apparent.

Additionally, for instructional purposes, the students were grouped according to their abilities and academic needs. This organization of human resources might have been a kind of support system to the students. This might explain their sense of their ability to achieve academically.

2. On the other hand, there is some evidence that, in some instances, students with low concepts in some areas of their selves might be threatened by being asked to reveal their true feelings and, therefore, might have responded to the six items in the "Achieving Self" subscale in a more positive direction. Leahy and Skirk (1985) indicated that students at this age may attempt to change the self's behavior to be more acceptable to stereotypes established by others (In this case the expectations of the academically successful student). "There is increased self-image disparity and an increase in attempts to hide the self from others" (p. 145).

The second puzzling finding is that of no difference between the two groups' self-concepts within the school environment. Recall that the at-risk students were organized into small self-contained classes, four in each of two schools. During any given day, these students had only to relate to three teachers and the guidance counselors. Additionally, for the greater part of their day, they were separated from the rest of the school personnel. The exception to this was during the lunch period, where they were

served with their grade-level peers. Having to interact with fewer adult authority figures and fewer peers might have given them a greater sense of security and, hence, they perceived their relationships with salient others in the school's environment to be as satisfying as did the regular class students. This is an interesting notion that needs further investigation. On the other hand, there, again, is evidence that, in some instances, students with low concepts of some dimensions of their selves might be reluctant to reveal their disbelief in the possibility that they might be successful in their school life. They might respond, therefore, to the six items in this subscale in a more positive direction (Burns, 1979, p. 146).

It is understandable that some of these students would have unfavorable attitudes about their physical selves. After all, they are at the threshold of adolescence and this aspect of their being begins to take on added significance, especially as they become aware of the physical differences that exist within their peer group. Hansen and Maynard (1973) stated that, "there definitely is evidence to suggest that a person's appearance is an important determiner of one's attitude toward self. Physical appearance, . . . because it helps evoke certain kinds of responses from other people can contribute to the development of positive or negative self concepts" (p. 37). However, it is unclear why the "Learning Lab" students would

have significantly less favorable attitudes about themselves, physically, than did the regular class students. This finding was especially perplexing because many of the boys and girls in the at-risk classes were on several sports teams.

The findings have implications for teachers, school administrators, and guidance counselors in the areas of curriculum planning, curriculum implementation, and interactions within teaching/learning environments. Jersild (1952) noted that, "it is reasonable to assume that for many young people school is second only to the home as an institution which determines the growing individual's self-concept of himself and his attitudes of self acceptance or self-rejection" (p. 49).

Bell (1979) stated that the school's basic functions are to serve as an agency that continues: (a) to facilitate the students' achievement, (b) to build moral character, (c) to help students to make adjustments to life, (d) to prepare students to reconstruct society, and (e) to strengthen the self-confidence of the students. Roberts and Cage (1975) asserted that a school curriculum must be established to enable each student to experience success, achieve a feeling of self-worth, and gain the confidence needed to complete school.

Purkey (1970) indicated that "while teachers need to be aware that students' self-concepts tend toward consistency,

they should also remember that change in self-concept is possible. . . This is done by inviting students to think well of themselves and their abilities to learn" (p. 32). In addition to Purkey's observations, LaBenne and Green (1969) discussed the many ways that teachers can influence the self-concept of students in their classes.

LaBenne and Greene (1969) noted that the teacher occupies a central position in the developing self-concept of their students. They further stated that, since there is a direct relationship between a student's self-concept and that student's behavior, the manner in which teachers present the subject is extremely important, because learning activities have "specific references and meaning for the development of the student's self-concept" (p. 32). Purkey (1970) noted that the development of positive self-concepts in children is dependent upon the teacher's concept of self and the "attitudes conveyed by the teacher" (p. 48).

Principals, in their roles as instructional and curriculum leaders, along with teachers and guidance counselors, might consider the findings of this study and of others reported herein as they plan the management of the instructional program. There is a strong possibility that the students in the "Learning Lab" have needs of an affective development intervention program that focuses on strengthening their self-concepts.

There is some evidence that early intervention programs

can be successful in accomplishing their objectives of improving the self-concepts of at-risk students. Stacy and Rust (1985) found that a structured program to develop the child's concept of self could make a significant contribution in this regard. Godleski (1966) found that, when the teachers followed a designed intervention plan, the concept of self of the students were significantly improved. Henry (1986) discussed an intervention program for 130 elementary school children who were experiencing behavioral and academic problems. He indicated that the success of the six-month intervention program showed the value of early intervention strategies.

In order to meet the challenge of educating these at-risk pupils, more attention might be given to extending the guidance services so that these professionals can be able to look closer at these students' attitudes about themselves and their relations within the school and classroom environments. Labenne and Greene (1964) stated:

The self-concept is built or achieved through accumulated social contacts and experiences with "significant others" during the growing-up process. These "significant others" profoundly affect young people and precondition the development of self-concept.

Significant others are parents, peers,
and teachers. (p. 20).

Elementary school counselors might act as consultants to teachers in planning and implementing affective activities the objective of which would be to foster positive self-concepts among the at-risk pupils. Leonard and Gottsdanker-Willekens (1987) advised "the investment of effort by the elementary staff in programs that will enhance self-concept" (p. 250). They recommended that counselors use a consultant model developed by Weinhold and Hilferty which suggested that:

The counselor can assist the teacher in developing activities that incorporate the self-concept skills of acceptance, contact, influence and constancy. In these activities, students can read materials related to their culture and heritage [italics added], read about people from other cultures or with different values, write about the advantages of being oneself, and write about their personal conflicts, abilities, and efforts. (p. 250)

While there was no significant difference between the concepts of the achieving self, there is still the need for the school professionals to be concerned. Investigations

are needed to ascertain if in these "Learning Lab" classes the teachers are expecting less from these students and, therefore, getting less from students of what constitutes quality, what persistence means, and what completion of tasks implies (all measured in this subscale). These at-risk students might be achieving far less than they would if measured against standards set for the regular class student. Labenne and Greene stated that "if a teacher believes that a student is a failure, he may provide him with experiences so shallow that he could not possibly fail. The challenge will not be there, and the student will view it as 'mickey mouse'" (p. 31).

Closer attention should be given to standards and expectations that are set for all students, especially for those who have been identified as potential dropouts. Perhaps, both teachers and guidance counselors, working together, might help these students to develop wholesome and lasting ideas about the values of accomplishment, achievement and proper social behavior.

The data did support the hypothesis that there are important and significant differences between some but not all aspects of the self-concept held by the regular class students and those in the "Learning Lab" (i.e., the at-risk students). The tasks that seem to loom ahead for school teachers, school administrators, guidance counselors, and parents are to determine the meanings of these self-concept

differences and, then, to set about planning intervention strategies that concentrate on the affective development of these "at-risk" pupils.

A brief final discussion about the limitations and the generalizability of the findings, and the delimitations set by the writer is in order. The "Learning Lab" program is the only one of its kind in the state of Mississippi. In fact, it is the only one of its kind in two states that border on Mississippi (Alabama and Louisiana). The program had been implemented after several months of delay and only eight classes were formed and housed in two elementary schools. The findings, as result, can be generalized only to the students presently in the program.

The researcher delimited the study to include only African-American pupils to avoid having to make racial comparisons. There is ample research that has focused on racial self-concept differences (See, for example, Healy (1969). Studies of this nature, in the opinion of this writer, only motivated educators to attempt to raise the level of one racial group (African-Americans) to the level of another racial group (European-Americans), as if one group's self-concept, somehow, was the object that all were to strive to duplicate. Perhaps, these were exercises in futility.

If African-American students could be identified as being at-risk and not at-risk, might not their concepts of

self differ significantly? If this were true, would it not seem plausible to report this and to stress the need for educators to concentrate on improving the self-image of the African-American at-risk student by using academically and socially successful African-American students as role models? Further, if any self-report score were to be the target, should it not come from within the African-American student population and not from some other ethnic group? At least, this would be a starting point for helping these Americans of African descent who are at-risk of not completing their education. These final notions, admittedly, are very subjective. They are expressed, however, in the hope that we will begin to study African-American students as a salient group unto themselves and not in comparison with other ethnic groups. Such research has proven to be disfunctional to the very thing that it purported to accomplish; namely, to improve the self-concept of African-American children in order for them to take their rightful place in this American society.

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Manoa, Hawaii: Author.

Table 1

Mean Scores and Results of t-Test Analyses of Differences Between "Learning Lab" ($n = 47$) and Regular Class Students ($n = 47$) on the Five Subscales of the About Me Self-Concept Report

General Self

Learning Lab = 13.60 Regular Class = 14.89
 $t [92] = 2.43, p = .017$

Self With Others

Learning Lab = 14.13 Regular Class = 15.49
 $t [92] = 3.53, p = .001$

Achieving Self

Learning Lab = 14.60 Regular Class = 15.34
 $t [92] = 1.91, p = .060$

Self and School

Learning Lab = 15.04 Regular Class = 14.85
 $t [92] = -.45, p = .653$

Physical Self

Learning Lab = 12.87 Regular Class = 14.09
 $t [92] = 2.81, p = .006$

SELF-CONCEPT REPORT DIFFERENCES/29

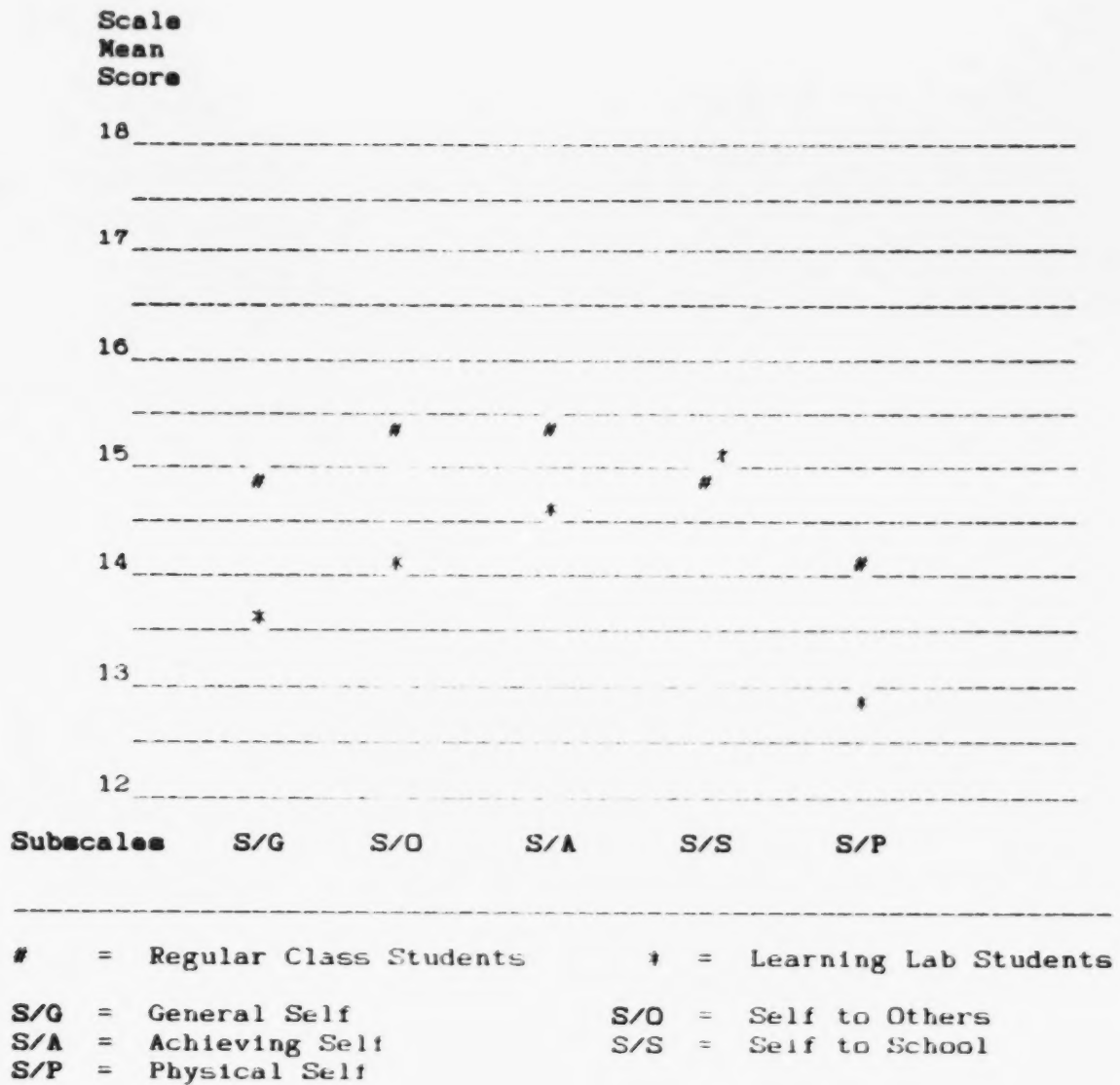


Figure 1. Graphic Comparisons of Five Subscale Mean Scores for At-risk (n = 47) and Regular Class Students (n = 47).